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The Ruling System in Western Zhou and the Idea of *Ming* 命*

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In the middle of the Western Zhou period great changes occurred inside Western Zhou society. The cultural elements which originated in the Shang 商 period and had until then played a great role were wiped away. From that time on, the specific cultural system of Western Zhou rose to predominance. The rapid increase of bronze vessel inscriptions 金文 which described the *Ceming* 冊命 rituals (hereafter these inscriptions will be called *Ceming jinwen* 冊命金文) must be closely connected with this big transformation.

The *Ceming* is a ritual for appointing a person to a certain official post. In classical literature this ritual was commonly called *Ceming* 策命. One finds a description of it in the *Chunqiu zuoshi zhuan* 春秋左氏傳 where it is said to have been performed in the twenty-eighth year of Xigong 僖公 for the Marquis Wen of Jin 晉文侯. The *Ceming jinwen* appeared in the middle of Western Zhou and came to form a big segment of bronze vessel inscriptions in the latter part of the Western Zhou period.

These inscriptions describe the ritual of appointing an influential person to an official post. At the site of the ritual, those who were going to be entrusted with an official post, after having listened to the content of their nomination which was orally announced by scribes, received a *Ceshu* 冊書 (slip-document) on which the details of their official duties were written down. In bronze vessel inscriptions such *Ceshu* were also called *Mingce* 命冊 (appointment slips) or *Mingshu* 命書 (appointment documents). As a noun, *ming* signified “the nomination to an official post,” while as verb it meant “to appoint a certain person to an official post.” Here I would like to add a supplementary explanation: at that time the word *ming* 命 (𠄎) and the word *ling* 令 (𠄎) were not clearly distinguished. *Ling* included the meaning of *ming* and, for the most part, in literary texts of later days *ling* was rewritten as *ming*. This is why in the present study, I will use the word *ming* in

* I express my gratitude to my colleague Dr. Monica Esposito for her stylistic suggestions on my draft.

a sense which includes such ancient use of the word *ling* and will translate accordingly.

It is important to note that unlike the rituals described in the early Western Zhou inscription of *Yihouze gui* 宜侯矢戣, the *Ceming* rituals were not used for the first appointment of a person to a certain official post but for approving a person to inherit an official post which had formerly been occupied by his ancestors. These rituals were basically formalities for succeeding the office-and-rank belonging to a certain family, and these successions were made possible through the mediation of the idea of *ming* 命.

Let me first give a typical example of a *Ceming jinwen*, the so-called inscription of *Shihu gui* 師虎戣 (The *gui*-vessel made by Shihu, Pl. 1).¹

惟元年六月既望甲戌，王在杜□，各于大室，井伯内右師虎，即立中廷，北鄉，王乎内史吳曰，冊令虎，王若曰，虎，在先王既令乃祖考事，營官嗣左右戲繁荊，今余惟帥井先王令，令女更乃祖考，營官嗣左右戲繁荊，敬夙夜，勿廢朕令，易女赤舄，用事，虎敢拜稽首，對揚天子不杯魯休，用作朕烈考日庚尊戣，子々孫々其永宝用

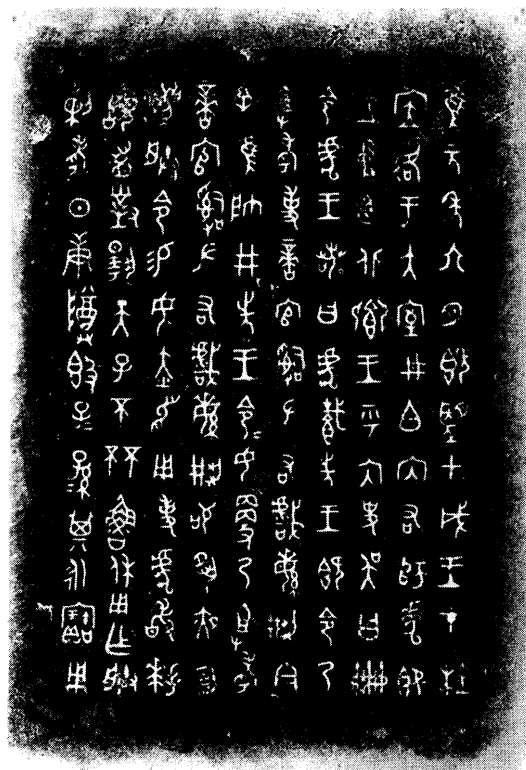
In the sixth month of the first year, after the full moon, on the *jiaxu* day, the Zhou king stayed at Du□, and the next morning, he attended the ritual at Dashi (the main room of the mausoleum). Jingbo 井伯, escorting Shihu 師虎 on the right-hand side, [entered the ritual site] and stood at the center of the court, facing north.

The king ordered the inner-scribe 内史 Wu 吳 to perform the *Ceming* ritual for Shihu. [The inner-scribe Wu announced]: Our king made the following pronouncement: “You Shihu! My royal predecessor already entrusted your grandfather and father with the duty and appointed them to manage the right and left sides of 戲繁荊 (the details of this duty is unknown). Now, following the previous king’s *ming* 命, I appoint you to manage the right and left sides of 戲繁荊 in the same way as your grandfather and father. You must carefully fulfill your charge from morning until night and must not neglect my *ming* 命.”

[The Inner-scribe Wu continued by saying]: “Our king gave you the red shoes. Put on these shoes and devote yourself to your job.”

Shihu made a polite bow by lowering his head to the ground to express his gratitude for having received such great favor from the Son of Heaven

¹ *Shangzhou qingtongqi mingwen xuan* 商周青銅器銘文選, no. 240 (Ma Chengyuan 馬承源 1986–1990 ed.), and Shirakawa Shizuka 白川靜 1965–1984, *Kinbun shūshaku* 金文集釋, no. 104.



Pl. 1 Shihu Gui

天子 (namely the Zhou king) and had this bronze vessel made in order to worship his distinguished father named Rigeng 日庚.

Shihu, may your children and grandchildren use this bronze vessel as precious heirloom.

The royal person hosting this ritual was a certain king of the Western Zhou dynasty. However, like in the case of the majority of the bronze vessel inscriptions, the identity of the king is not recorded. Such a principle in bronze vessel inscriptions may reflect the basic idea that people in those days had about their kings. In other words, they attached greater importance to being in a position of the Zhou kingship in general than to the individual identity of a specific Zhou king.

The Zhou king said to Shihu that his royal predecessor had already given

to an ancestor of Shihu the *ming* to manage 戲繁荊 and that he also ordered him to do the same job of managing the 戲繁荊. That is to say, the present Zhou king followed the ancestral Zhou king's model and made Shihu to *geng* 更 (inherit) his ancestor's job. The *Ceming* rituals were the formalities to reproduce a model of the official post appointment in the past, both for the Zhou king and his vassals. Another similar example is found in the *Shan ding* 善鼎 (inscription on the tripod made by Shan):²

唯十又一月初吉，辰才丁亥，王才宗周，王各大師宮，王曰，善，昔先王既令女左
 丌𠂔侯，今余唯肇𠂔先王令，令女左丌𠂔侯，監𠂔師戍，易女乃祖旗，用事，善敢拜
 稽首，对揚皇天子不𠂔休，用作宗室宝尊…

At the beginning of the eleventh month, on the *dinghai* day, the Zhou king was in Zongzhou 宗周 (one of the capitals of Western Zhou). The Zhou king proceeded to the mausoleum at Dashi.

The king said: "You Shan 善! My ancestral king already gave your ancestors a *ming* and ordered them to work as staff officers of the marquis of 巢. Now, I am inheriting that *ming* which the former Zhou king had given to your family. I order you to work as staff officer of the marquis of 巢 and supervise the garrison at 𠂔."

The Zhou king added: "I give you the flag which your ancestor had used. Use this flag and apply yourself!"

Shan made a polite bow lowering his head to the ground to express his gratitude for having received such great benefit from the Son of Heaven, and made the ritual vessel (bronze vessel) in his clan mausoleum to be used on ritual occasions.

From this inscription we can again notice that, as the ancestors of Shan had already received the *ming* from the earlier Zhou kings, the present Zhou king who inherited (肇𠂔) that *ming* appoints Shan to the job of his ancestors. In other words, the main content of the *Ceming jinwen* consists in describing the ritual of appointment which the present Zhou king confers on his vassals by reproducing the earlier Zhou king's appointment of the *ming* to his vassal's ancestors.

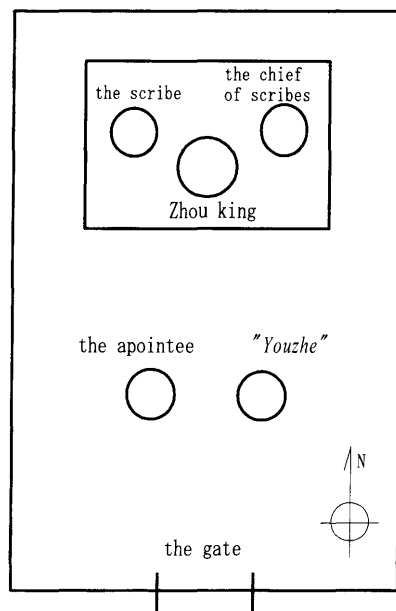
From the two typical examples of the *Ceming jinwen* of Western Zhou mentioned above one can remark that this sort of bronze inscription describes

² *Shangzhou qingtongqi mingwen xuan* 商周青銅器銘文選, no. 321, and *Kinbun shūshaku* 金文集釋, no. 133.

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the *Ceming* ritual as it was held by the Zhou king and his vassals. As can be seen below, although each description of ritual differs in detail, the synopsis is fundamentally the same (Pl. 2):

- The Zhou king comes to the mausoleum and stays there for one night. The next morning, the Zhou king goes to the main room of the mausoleum and stands there facing south.
- The man who is going to receive a *ming* accompanied by a *youzhe* 右者 (the right-hand person, assistant) comes into the ritual site which is situated in the front courtyard of the mausoleum. The appointee and the *youzhe* stand at the center of the ritual courtyard, turning to the north and facing the Zhou king.
- A *shi* 史 (chief of scribes) hands a *Ceshu* 冊書 to the king, and the king orders [another] *shi* (scribe) to confer the *ming* to the appointee by reading that *Ceshu*.
- The *shi* reads out the *Ceshu* and orders him to accept his official job.
- The appointee receives gifts from the king while the latter says “using these gifts, you must apply yourself to your job.”



Pl. 2 The site of the *Ceming* ritual

- The appointee makes a polite bow and receives the *Ceshu* 冊書. Then he withdraws attaching the *Ceshu* at his waist before returning to the ritual site and [in order to express his loyalty] presents a jade object to the king.

After such a description of the *Ceming* ritual, the inscription ends by mentioning the casting of the bronze vessels on which this inscription is engraved.

The word *ming*, which was originally written on the *Ceshu*, forms the center of this kind of bronze vessel inscription along with the detailed description of the ritual in which the appointee received the *Ceming*. It ends by saying that the appointee, in order to express his gratitude for the great benefit conferred upon him by the Son of Heaven, casts the bronze vessel for worshipping his ancestors, and adds the wish that the descendants of the appointee may use this bronze vessel as a treasure for many generations.

The *Ceshu* which the Zhou king gave to an appointee was brought to the appointee's home (fief) and kept in the family's ancestral shrine together with the bronze vessel on which the description of the *Ceming* ritual and the content of the conferred *ming* was engraved. This vessel was used in the ritual of worshipping the ancestors. We might then recognize that the ruling system of Western Zhou, through the *Ceming* ritual and the casting of bronze vessels was deeply involved in the ancestral cult of each family.

As we have seen above, the *Ceming* rituals were the formalities of reconfirming the appointment of an official post that had been given to a certain family, and these rituals were carried out based on the principle of repeating an archetype. The concept of *ming* which was peculiar to that period forms the background of these rituals. In fact, the succession of the official post was based on the transmission of the *ming* which was conferred by the previous Zhou king to his vassals before being transmitted again to the vassals' heirs by the successive king.

In the *Ceming jinwen* the succession of such appointments was described using various verbs such as, for instance:

令汝更乃祖考事	(師虎毀)
I order you to <i>geng</i> 更 your grandfather and father's job.	
更乃祖考足大祝, 官嗣豐人眾九盤祝	(申毀)
I order you to <i>geng</i> 更 your grandfather and father to assist	
Dazhu 大祝 (Great Invocator, the director of invocators), and	
manage Feng 豐 people and nine Xi 盤 invocators.	







In these two examples, the verb *geng* 更 means “the succession of an official duty handed down from one’s forefathers.” The character *geng* 更 ordinarily means “the replacement of things or men from a certain position,” but in those days, as we mentioned above, it mainly signified “the succession of a position.”

余唯黼先王令	(善鼎)
I am going to 黼 [verb] the previous king’s <i>ming</i> .	
余今隹黼稟乃令	(師詢殷)
I am now going to 黼稟 [verb] your <i>ming</i> .	
先王既令女，今余隹黼先王令，令女官黼邑人師人	(師賁殷)
The previous king already gave you the <i>ming</i> , now I 黼 the previous king’s <i>ming</i> and order you to manage the inhabitants and warriors.	
其各前文人，其類才帝廷陟降，黼陟皇大魯命，用齡保我家	(衛殷)
Our righteous ancestors now get on to the Lord of Heaven’s court. They were 黼陟 (securely succeeding) the bright “great <i>ming</i> ” 大命, and using such <i>ming</i> to look after our family.	

In these examples, the verb 黼, combined with many other words, expresses the succession of the *ming*. The last example shows that the *ming* was needed to be held not only on earth but also maintained in heaven thanks to the assistance of the family’s ancestors.

As one can see from these typical examples of *Ceming jinwen*, there were special verbs indicating the succession of official duty and the *ming*. Although it is highly regrettable that we cannot get a sense of the detailed differences to which these verbs refer, it is worthy of mention that the majority of the characters of verbs meaning succession has, as its constitutive element, the thread radical 糸. Especially the left half of the character 黼 illustrates the delivery of reeled threads from one’s hand to someone else’s hand. I presume that in those days the idea of the succession of an hereditary post was closely connected with the symbolic meanings of thread or weaving (Pl. 3). This makes me think of a Japanese old song which goes as follows:

しずやしず，しずのおだまき繰り返し，昔を今になすよしもがな
 Just like the humble people’s loom goes back and forth over and over,
 and reeled thread is weaved into the linen, I am very anxious to return
 to old days

嗣	 永孟	 彝方彝
繡	 牆盤	 師克盥
孫	 旗鼎	 多友鼎

Pl. 3 Characters related to the thread

In this song, the word *odamaki* おだまき (reeled thread) have not direct meaning, it only introduces the verb *kurikaeshi* 繰り返し meaning something like “repeating over and over again or harping on the same string.” This association of ideas was probably based on similar folkloric concepts as ancient Chinese words which expressed the repeated succession of an ancestral post.

I surmise that the character 孫 (the grandson) which has the thread in its structural element, also rests on the same idea. The old dictionary *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 explains the character 孫 in the following way:

孫，子之子曰孫，从系子，系續也

The son of son is the grandson 孫. This character is made up of 系 (the thread) and 子 (the son). This 系 means “continuation.”

This dictionary thus explains that the character 系 (in old Chinese characters, 系 and 糸 were not clearly distinguished) signifies “continuation.” The representative characters indicating continuation like 續 and 繼, also have the thread radical as a structural element.

There was a Chinese folk belief that a bundle of thread could prevent one’s soul from escaping from one’s body. For example, at the festival of *duanwu* 端午 (on the fifth day of the fifth month), the *Xumenglou* 續命縷 (the thread for prolonging life) is tied to one’s arms. These bundles of threads were believed to be able to keep one’s soul safe. The bundles of threads were closely connected with the cult of soul in Chinese folk beliefs. The transmission of thread expressed in old Chinese characters, probably symbolizes the

succession of the ancestor's soul.

In connection with this, I would like to point out that the character *si* 嗣 which is the root of the character 司 (to manage) also contains the same composition elements of handing the reeled thread in its left side. In the inscription of *Shiyou gui* 師酉毀 one reads:

王乎史牆冊命師酉，嗣乃祖齊官邑人·虎臣·西門夷…³

The Zhou king instructed the scribe Qiang 史牆 to carry out the *Ceming* ritual for Shiyou.

[The scribe Qiang read aloud the *Ceshu* as follows]: “The king ordered you to *si* 嗣 your grandfather, and manage the inhabitants 邑人, the king's bodyguards 虎臣, and the Western Gate aliens.

The character *si* 嗣 was also used in some compounds, especially for names of official posts such as Sigong 嗣工 and Situ 嗣徒. We can thus easily remark that this character was the progenitor of the character *si* 司 which was used later on. In classical literature, the official posts 嗣工 and 嗣徒 are regarded as identical to Sigong 司工/司空 and Situ 司徒. Both 嗣 and 司 mean “to fulfill an official function,” but basically imply the meaning of “succession.” That is to say, for people of that period, the official functions were in principle inherited from one's ancestors and succeeded among specific families.⁴

If that is the case then we must search for the occurrence of such prototypes in the *Ceming* rituals. According to the bronze vessel sources, these rituals took place in the period of the foundation of the Western Zhou dynasty, at the time of king Wen 文王 and king Wu 武王. We can see this, for example, from the inscription of *Shike Xu* 師克盥 (The *xu*-vessel made by Shike) which goes as follows:

王若曰，師克，丕顯文武膺受大命，匍有四方，則繇隹乃先祖考又爵于周邦，干害王身，作爪牙，王曰，克，余隹經乃先祖考克齡臣先王，昔余既令女，今余隹糴稟乃令，令女更乃祖考，嗣左右虎臣…⁵

The Zhou king said: “You, Shike 師克! The brilliant kings Wen and Wu received the “great *ming*” (i.e., the Heavenly mandate 天命) and

³ *Kinbun shūshaku* 金文集釋, no. 173.

⁴ On the character *si* 嗣, see Matsui Yoshinori 松井嘉德 2002, p. 132.

⁵ *Shangzhou qingtongqi ming wenxuan* 商周青銅器銘文選, no. 307, *Kinbun shūshaku* 金文集釋, no. 172.

conquered the four regions. On that occasion, your grandfather and father rendered distinguished service to the Zhou state, protecting the king's body and working as the king's limbs."

The king continued by saying: "You Ke! I never forget that your grandfather and father exerted themselves under the previous Zhou kings. In former times, I (my preceding kings) had given you (your ancestors) the *ming*. I now hand over to you the *ming* which was already given to your family, and I order you to take over your ancestor's job and manage the right and left sides of king's guardsmen.

This inscription also represents the Zhou king's order to Ke to succeed the *ming* which the previous Zhou kings had given to Ke's ancestors, and it declares that the model of relationship between the Zhou king and the Ke family had its root in the early Western Zhou period when king Wen and king Wu received the "great *ming*" and founded the Zhou dynasty. At that time, Ke's ancestors had rendered distinguished services to the Zhou state. Based on this, the present Zhou king ordered Ke to serve him as faithfully as Ke's ancestors served king Wen and king Wu. The starting point of the succession and the repetition takes place when king Wen and king Wu received the "great *ming*." The word "great *ming*" matches the word *tianming* 天命 in late literature indicating, as is well known, the Heavenly mandate conferred by the Lord of Heaven upon the earthly sovereign to rule the entire world. The earthly king could thus establish his dynasty and rule the world on the condition that he had received and was holding the *tianming*.

The majority of the *Ceming* rituals described in bronze vessel inscriptions were held between the Zhou king and his vassals. But there were cases in which the same kind of rituals was performed between the Zhou king's vassals and the vassal's vassals 陪臣 (the rear vassals). If we take into account that in those days the men who could cast bronze vessels belonged to highest ranks, we can infer that it was natural that bronze vessel inscriptions describing the rituals in which the Zhou king's vassals conferred the *Ceming* upon their own vassals were rare. Yet, we can rightfully presume that in the lower classes the *Ceming* rituals were equally generally performed.

For example, we can read from the inscription *Mao gui* 卯戣 (the *gui*-vessel made by Mao) the following passage:

隹王十又一月既生霸丁亥，榮季入右卯，立中廷，榮伯乎令卯曰，載乃先祖考死嗣榮公室，昔乃祖亦既令乃父死嗣葬人，不淑取我家棟用喪，今余非敢夢先公又歆遂，

余懋称先公官，今余佳令女死嗣葬宫葬人，女母敢不善…⁶

In the eleventh month of the Zhou king, on the *dinghai* day near full moon, Rongji 荣季 entered the ritual site, escorting Mao 卯 at his right-hand side, and stood at the center of the court.

Then, Rongbo 荣伯 ordered to confer the *ming* to Mao. Rongbo said: “Your grandfather and father have rendered great service to the Rong family. In the old days your (my?) ancestors conferred upon your father the *ming* to manage the Fang 莽 people. But unfortunately the affairs of my family did not go well. I never forget that my forefathers estimated your ancestors very highly, so I now give you the *ming* to manage the Fang palace and the Fang people. You must not neglect your duties.

In this *Ceming* ritual held at Rong’s house, Mao received the *ming* as vassal of the Rong family. As the Rong family was one of the most powerful families in the late Western Zhou, we frequently meet this name in bronze vessel inscriptions.

In this case, just like in the *Ceming* rituals performed by the Zhou kings, Mao’s father was given the *ming* to manage the Fang 莽 people and his son was consequently appointed to be in charge of the management of the Fang palace and the Fang people as well.

Finally, this inscription is very noteworthy because in this ritual Rongji, who is probably a member of the Rong family, acts as *youzhe* 右者 (the right-hand person, assistant) for appointing Mao. In the *Ceming* rituals, when the appointee enters the ceremonial site he must be escorted by a *youzhe*. Although there are already many studies examining the *youzhe*’s function in these rituals, some problems still remain.⁷ One of the fundamental questions is, for instance, if the *youzhe* was on the side of the person conferring the *ming* or of the appointee. If one can use the example of this Mao’s vessel inscription to generalize for the case of *Ceming* rituals performed by the Zhou king, the *youzhe* might take the side of the Zhou king and have the role of introducing the appointee to the king.

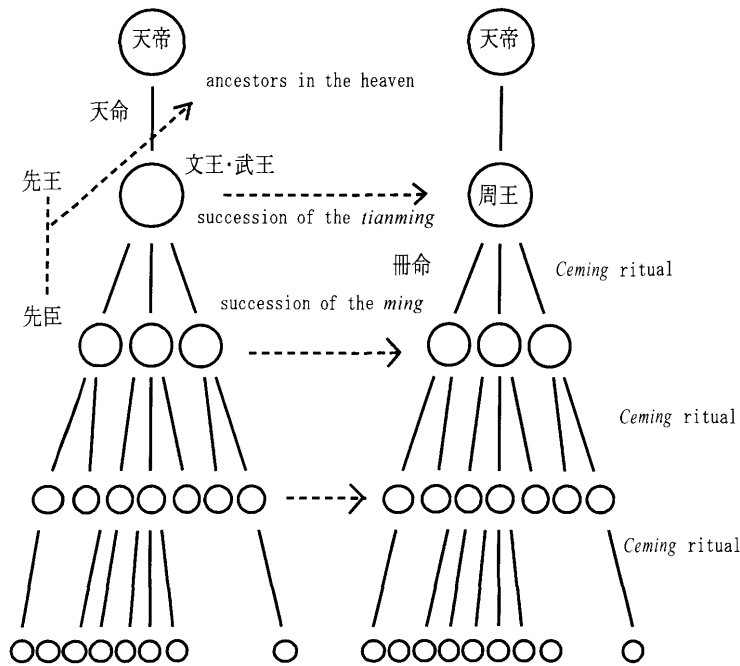
The *ming* was firstly conferred by the Zhou king to his direct vassals before being extended from direct vassals to rear vassals. A person could distribute the *ming* once he had received the *ming* from his own Lord. He

⁶ *Shangzhou qingtongqi ming wenxuan* 商周青铜器铭文选, no. 244, *Kinbun shūshaku* 金文集释, no. 149.

⁷ Yang Guan 楊寬 1984, p. 102, and Wang Zhongwen 汪中文 1999, p. 225

gave the *ming* to his vassals and order them to fulfill a certain duty. The distribution of the *ming* meant a partial redistribution of the authority he had received from his own Lord. The higher the rank of the person from whom authority is obtained, the broader the authority that could be distributed to his vassals.

We can thus assume that there was an ideal hierarchy of the *ming* behind the ruling system of Western Zhou in which the Zhou kings took their position at the top. The Zhou kings could distribute the *ming* and an official post to their vassals on the grounds that they had received and were holding the “great *ming*” of the Lord of Heaven. The *Ceming* rituals were the formalities through which the Zhou kings distributed a part of their authority, that is the authority of ruling the whole world once they had received it via the *tianming*. The hierarchy of the *ming* which constructed Western Zhou dynasty’s ruling system was based on the fundamental claim, real or fictitious, that the Zhou kings were in possession of the *ming* conferred upon them by the Lord of Heaven (Pl. 4).



Pl. 4 The hierarchy of the *ming*

As we have discussed above, the main function of the *Ceming* rituals was to repeat a prototype, and this prototype was based on a true or mythical fact that, at the time of king Wen and king Wu, the Zhou kings and their vassals cooperated in establishing the state, and that the Lord of Heaven who was glad of their devotion conferred upon them the *tianming*. It is probable that the idea of *tianming* came already into existence in early Western Zhou, but it drastically developed in the latter half of Western Zhou, and the actual ruling system of Western Zhou was legitimized by this peculiar idea. The *tianming* was the source of all sorts of *ming* which maintained the social system in those days.⁸

This idea of *tianming*, which the Confucian ideology was to idealize in the political activities of king Wen and king Wu as well as in the principle of government, crystallized in the latter half of Western Zhou. Continually changing its original form through the dynasties, it functioned as a fundamental principle that legitimized the sovereignty of each dynasty.

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⁸ Kominami Ichirô 小南一郎 1992, p. 23.